

# **\*\*ATTENTION\*\***

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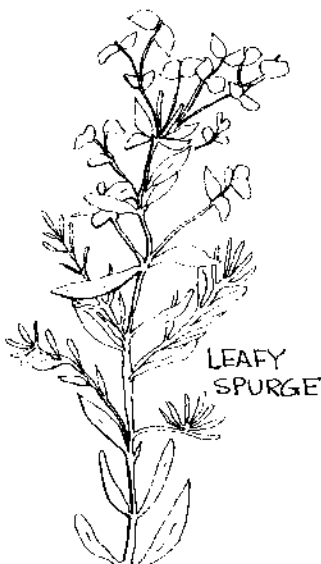
EURASIAN  
WATERMILFOIL



POISON  
OAK



MUSK  
THISTLE



LEAFY  
SPURGE

# Weeds and Wildlands

by Jan Stiverson,  
Coordinator  
Okanogan County  
Noxious Weed Control  
Board



DIFFUSE  
KNAPWEED

Illustrations by Pam Wood

Have you ever had a day of pheasant hunting and then spent the best part of the evening trying to dig the burs out of your poor dog's coat? Or maybe when you were out, you just couldn't get old Rover to dive into that patch of thistle where a big rooster had just run for cover?

How about that grassy meadow you hoped to find when you left home for the family camping trip? The place you finally settled on turned out to be infested with those sticky bushes that seem to cling to almost everything. Another plant on the "least wanted" list is stinging nettles. That's the stuff that seems to hide around every good fishing spot on some of our favorite trout streams. And of course, everyone has a favorite story they're just itching to tell about poison ivy or poison oak.

Weeds can be not only a nuisance, as we're all aware, but they can also keep sportsmen from gaining access to their favorite recreation sites. Access

to private lands is being threatened because landowners fear the increased spread of noxious weeds, and serious consideration of the weed problem is necessary if we are to safeguard that access.

Noxious weeds are, quite simply, any plants that occur where we don't want them. We're all familiar with the dandelions that dot our lawns, but there are many other weeds spreading throughout our state. Most of these troublesome plants aren't new, with many crossing over from Europe or Asia many years ago as seeds hitchhiking on some other useful import. One of the most aggressive of these unwelcome immigrants was introduced into eastern Washington in the 1930s, and its subsequent spread has been phenomenal.

In the following article, the Department of Game is pleased to present the views of Jan Stiverson, Coordinator of the Okanogan County Weed Control Board, on this noxious invader.—Editor

My disdain for weeds began early in my childhood. I knew that weeds were the plants that made my nose run and my head ache. Weeds were the pests that I had to pull out of the garden before I could go to the swimming pool. Nasty patches of puncturevine would pop my bicycle tires, and it always seemed as though you had to walk through stinging nettles to get the best fishing holes. My allergic reaction to poison oak kept me pinned in a hospital bed for three days with an unbearable itch. As I became an adult and was made aware of the economic and aesthetic devastation that weeds can cause, I realized that the annoyance and discomfort caused by weeds during my childhood were only side-effects of a much more severe problem.

In my capacity as Weed Coordinator for Okanogan County, I witness daily the serious problems that noxious weeds can cause if left unchecked. I have seen how infestations of Eurasian watermilfoil, musk thistle,

leafy spurge, and other noxious weeds have become a direct threat to our most valuable natural resources: Land and water. The worst weed problem in Okanogan County is a plant called diffuse knapweed. This weed covers more than 400,000 acres of land in Okanogan County alone, and is rapidly making headway into many areas of the state. It is a weed that has truly earned its status as being "noxious."

Diffuse knapweed is a greyish-green plant that is generally a winter annual or biennial in growth cycle. When the seeds germinate in the summer or fall, the plant attains a height of up to three feet and has many branches topped with flowers that range from a dirty white to purple. The bracts of the flower head are tipped with small, sharp spines that latch onto anything that gets close, especially vehicles. Nearly every initial infestation of diffuse knapweed begins along roadsides and spreads out from there.

Diffuse knapweed affects range, timber, and recreational lands and appears to grow quite well in different soil types and elevations. The main reason the plant spreads so prolifically is because it produces substances which inhibit the growth of native and introduced vegetation. Some studies indicate that diffuse knapweed patches will at least double every five years.

Knapweed is a genuine problem for ranchers and dryland farmers. The plant has no nutritional value whatsoever, and if animals are forced to eat large amounts of weeds, toxicity symptoms can occur. Diffuse knapweed is also causing major problems in the forest. Tree seedlings may become severely retarded or choked out completely when forced to compete with knapweed. Deer and other wildlife also suffer because knapweed chokes out their natural forage.

People directly involved in agriculture are not the only ones affected by the diffuse knapweed problem. Sportsmen and tourists can look forward to pitching their tents in campsites full of knapweed and surrounded by still more knapweed for as far as the eye can see in any direction. Public lands are among the most severely impacted areas because of heavy usage and inadequate funding for control. As the knapweed problem

worsens, and because of the fact that vehicles are the main source of spreading the weed, recreationists can expect more and more private landowners to close off their land to public use. This has already begun on a large scale in Okanogan County.

What can be done about the diffuse knapweed problem? I sincerely believe that education is the best weapon in the fight against noxious weeds. If everyone would follow the twelve suggestions listed below, the spread of knapweed would be slowed considerably.

1. Learn to identify diffuse knapweed and help to educate others to the problems it can cause.
2. Keep vehicles on established roads.
3. Wear cuffless pants.
4. Remove seeds from your clothing, your animals, and most importantly your vehicle before leaving an infested area.
5. Pass this article on to someone else, or have it read at an organization to which you belong.
6. Pull up isolated plants - where there is one plant this year, there will be ten the next.
7. Reseed disturbed soil.
8. Don't purchase hay infested with diffuse knapweed.
9. Ask your county weed office or extension agent for information on knapweed and other noxious weeds.

10. Encourage local, state and federal agencies to control knapweed on public lands.

11. Report isolated infestations to your county weed office or extension agent.

The twelfth step is the most important: Get involved! Control knapweed on your property and encourage your neighbors to do the same. Learn more about your county weed control board and the noxious weeds which the board is attempting to control in your area. If your county is one of the few in Washington which does not have a weed board, encourage your county government to form one.

Okanogan County waited 20 years too long before it formed a weed board. In the late 1950s, all of the diffuse knapweed in the county could have been controlled for around \$1,500. Now it would cost \$5 to \$6 million to perform the initial application to control the weed.

I think that one of the main reasons noxious weeds have gotten out of hand in many areas is because of people's attitudes. When I say "weeds," most people think of dandelions growing in their lawn, but it is time for people to change their attitudes and become aware of the true scope of the problem. Weeds are not just a problem that affects the farmer; weeds affect everyone. Therefore, it is quite clear that in order to win the fight against noxious weeds, everyone will have to become involved. □



Vehicles are the main carriers in spreading diffuse knapweed, and many more landowners may therefore be forced to close off their land to public use.

(Brad Wood photo)



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